

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 216

SP 036 455

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TITLE Success in the First Year of Teaching: Effects of a Clinical Experience Program.
PUB DATE 21 Feb 95
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Teacher Educators (Detroit, MI, February 21, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beginning Teacher Induction; *Beginning Teachers; College School Cooperation; Elementary Secondary Education; Field Experience Programs; Higher Education; Mentors; Preservice Teacher Education; Professional Development Schools; *Student Teaching; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Education Curriculum; *Teaching Experience
IDENTIFIERS *Clinical Teacher Education; Elmhurst College IL

ABSTRACT

Findings from a study of seven novice teachers who graduated from Elmhurst College (Illinois) indicate that the preservice clinical experiences received by these teachers during their participation in the Satellite Program contributed to successful first-year teaching experiences. This follow-up study examines Satellite Program graduates who participated in the program between 1991 and 1993 and who began their first year of teaching in either Fall 1992 or Fall 1993. Four of the seven beginning teachers were hired by the Satellite schools in which they had been placed as student teachers. During interviews, all seven teachers gave credit to their clinical experiences for presenting a realistic perception of schools and teaching. There was evidence that all subjects were able to reflect on their practice, identify strengths and weaknesses, and develop action plans for correction and improvement. The novice teachers discussed a variety of problems encountered during the first year of teaching. For the most part, subjects acknowledged the value of their preservice mentors in providing support and strengthening professional skills. These teachers sought formal and informal mentor relationships during their first year of teaching. The Satellite Program was collaboratively designed by Elmhurst College faculty and faculty from the Satellite schools to improve the clinical experience component of the college's teacher education program. Interview questions used in the study are included. (Contains 22 references.) (IAH)

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SUCCESS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF TEACHING:
EFFECTS OF A CLINICAL EXPERIENCE PROGRAM*

a paper presented by

Linda F. Tusin, Ph.D.

at the

Annual Meeting

of the Association of Teacher Educators

February 21, 1995
Detroit, Michigan

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**SUCCESS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF TEACHING:
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LINDA F. TUSIN, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this study was to examine the effects of the Elmhurst College Satellite Program, a clinical experience program in teacher education, on first year teachers. Problems facing first year teachers are well documented and often discussed (Borko, 1986; Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1992; Huling-Austin, 1990; Veeman, 1984). Providing support to improve this important phase of professional life is seen as essential (Carnegie Forum, 1986; Goodlad, 1990; Holmes, 1986; Howey & Zimpher, 1986; Kagan, 1992). A goal in designing the Satellite Program was to improve the first year teaching experience by improving preservice clinical experiences (Alexander, 1990; Evertson, 1990; Goodman, 1985, 1986; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Satellite Program is a collaborative program linking teacher education students more directly and meaningfully to schools (Tusin, 1993). Each student is linked to a Satellite School during pre-student teaching clinical experiences. The school becomes the student's home base for clinical experiences. The student visits other schools to broaden their experiences, yet continually returns to the Satellite school for continuity. Within this school the student is assigned a mentor, a teacher who supports and assists the student in clinical experiences during the teacher education program. Mentor teachers are recognized with adjunct faculty status. They become an essential and integral part of the teacher education program.

Mentor teachers and support programs for first year teachers have become more frequently available in recent years (Huling-Austin, 1992; Healy & Welchert, 1990). The guidance and support of a mentor teacher have been found to be invaluable for many beginning teachers. Linking mentor teachers with teacher education students was initiated as a way to bridge theory and practice. It recognized the complex, non-linear process of socialization in schools and the need for personal, social and technical support (Lawson, 1992) in the clinical experiences of teacher education. "For the protégé, the object of mentoring is the achievement of an identity transformation, a movement from the status of understudy to that of self-directing colleague" (Healy & Welchert, p.17). Having the support and guidance of a mentor teacher while studying to become a teacher appeared invaluable.

The Satellite Program was designed to also address the problems of oversimplification and misrepresentation in short term classroom visits. Preservice teachers often miss the purpose,

planning, and reflection of teachers during their clinical experiences (Evertson, 1990; Ross, 1990). They often have little real knowledge of pupils and classrooms and have trouble with the combination of roles in these classrooms (Kagan, 1992). The link in the Satellite Program to a school and mentor offers students more in depth experiences in a classroom. Satellite Program preservice teachers also have opportunities to explore teachers' roles beyond the classroom in terms of school politics and decisions, social relationships, communication, and collaboration (Howey & Zimpher, 1986; Conoley, 1989). The Satellite Program provides the student an internship over time in an entire school, not just a classroom as in a traditional student teaching assignment. These experiences were designed to better link coursework to clinical experiences. They were designed to bridge the gap of teacher education and teaching in schools. Reducing the reality shock of first year teachers (Veeman, 1984) was a goal. The program rests upon the Education Department theme, The Teacher as a Caring Creator and Director of Learning Experiences, and its model which includes professional knowledge, subject specialty knowledge, and clinical experiences as three essential entwined components of the teacher education program. Using Griffin's definition: "...the ideal teacher is a knowledgeable, well-organized, and consistent classroom leader who interacts with students, colleagues, and patrons purposefully and effectively" (1986, p.6).

METHOD

To study the effects of the Satellite Program on the first year of teaching, a follow up study of graduates was designed. The interview format was selected for data collection to allow for a more extensive discussion with graduates of their perceptions and their experiences. This methodology views teachers as important partners in the creation of knowledge (Schubert, 1991). Schubert's study of teacher lore, "...the study of knowledge, ideas, perspectives and understandings of teachers" (p.207), is based on the idea of praxis, a blend of theory and practice. "Praxis assumes a continuous process of critical reflection that joins and mediates theory and practice" (p.214). This method invites teachers to share in the creation of knowledge. What they have learned from their experience becomes the focus.

Initial interviews were conducted with three graduates who completed their first year of teaching during the 1992-93 school year (Table 1). They began the Satellite Program in its pilot phase during spring term 1991 and graduated during the 1991-92 school year. To extend the sample, interviews were conducted with four additional graduates who completed their first year of teaching during the 1993-94 school year. They began the Satellite Program in the 1991-92 school year and graduated in the 1992-93 school year. Of the seven Caucasian women interviewed, five were elementary education graduates, one was an early childhood education graduate, and one was a secondary education graduate. All earned undergraduate degrees. All had participated in the Satellite Program for one to two years. Four of these teachers did their

student teaching in their original Satellite school while the other three had multiple assignments during their teacher education program. Four teachers were hired as first year teachers in the school in which they student taught. Three were hired in other school districts. Six interviews were conducted in September as the teachers were beginning their second year of teaching. One interview was conducted in July before the second year of teaching began.

Questions were designed to assess the perceptions of these new teachers at the conclusion of their first year of teaching (Appendix A). Questions focused on which teacher education experiences they viewed as most helpful in preparation for their first year of teaching, their strengths as new teachers, which aspects of teaching were most difficult for them, the influence of their Satellite clinical experiences as preparation for teaching and work in schools, the role and value of their mentor in teacher education, and suggestions to improve the teacher education program. School principals confirmed that each of the interviewed teachers was successful in the first year teaching. All of these teachers returned to the same school the following year. The three students interviewed in 1993 have all returned for a third year of teaching and they received tenure in their school districts at the conclusion of their second year of teaching.

RESULTS

Findings from the study offer insights into the ways in which Satellite Program clinical experiences help bridge the transition from teacher education student to teacher. Interviews show evidence of successful first year teaching experiences from the perspective of these novice teachers. Findings are organized in the following categories: an overwhelming yet expected reality, strengths, problems, mentors, and a summary of the evidence.

AN OVERWHELMING YET EXPECTED REALITY

Each of the seven teachers described the first year experiences differently. Initial comments ranged from "I felt well prepared" to "I hated the beginning, although I can laugh about it now." In exploring these initial comments and their further discussion of these experiences, a generalization became apparent. The full impact of being a teacher did not hit them until this first year experience. "It was like a train hit me." The full impact was overwhelming, but it was not surprising to them, with one exception. The one student who "hated the beginning" was surprised by student behavior and their lack of response to the behavior strategies that had worked so well in student teaching. Other aspects of her position were not so surprising. While the responsibilities and demands on them were great, six of the seven teachers did not express the reality shock of many novice teachers (Veeman, 1984). The teacher who felt well prepared said, "Being on your own requires a lot of dedication. New plans daily and creativity take time. You have to have a motivation to learn. There isn't always someone to give you a pat on the back."

All seven teachers credited their clinical experiences for giving them a realistic perception of schools and teaching. They felt their expectations of the job were on target.

STRENGTHS

Numerous strengths were noted by all of the teachers. Five teachers stated that establishing a positive rapport with students and a classroom environment conducive to learning was a strength. Strengths in management and discipline were noted by three of the teachers. They felt they had developed excellent systems for behavior and for classroom routines. They felt their classrooms ran smoothly. Two teachers discussed their ability to teach reading and language as a strength. Successes working with parents were noted by two teachers as well. Other strengths noted by individuals were rapport with the staff; knowledge of curriculum and multiple teaching strategies; actual teaching and explanations of subject matter; ability to teach science; ability to develop units of instruction; excellence in keeping anecdotal records, getting to really know the children and persistence in getting a special placement for an individual student; seeking help from colleagues and mentors; being flexible and open to ideas; having fun with the class; and setting realistic goals for oneself. All seven teachers were highly reflective of their first year experiences. They not only described their experiences, including strengths and weaknesses, but also explored reasons for these experiences and plans of action for change and improvement. Another strength noted was that six of the seven were already beginning additional education, either in a formal master's degree program or through workshops and individual courses.

PROBLEMS

Problems varied for each individual teacher. Two felt they had problems with discipline and management, in keeping with the usual concern of beginning teachers (Veeman, 1984). One student was surprised by the severity of student individual problems and their lack of response to behavioral strategies she had found successful in student teaching. Her focus on these major concerns caused her to miss the smaller concerns which then developed into problems. The other student felt she was inconsistent and varied from strict to lenient concerning behavior and homework. Three teachers had trouble establishing a professional distance. They felt they became too emotionally attached or involved with their students. Addressing student problems as professionals was difficult. Other areas of concern noted by individuals were a weakness in teaching math; knowing how to balance use of textbooks and personally developed units of instruction while following curriculum and assessment guidelines; planning for individual student needs; scheduling; planning for the first day of school; specific procedures such as field trip planning; trying too many things at one time; teacher subgroups fighting within the school; fear of parents; the pressure of comparisons to other experienced and successful teachers in a team

teaching situation; and the anxiety of having a one year contract and not knowing if there would be an available position for the following year.

These teachers also spoke of the problem solving they used to address the problems they encountered. All seven of these teachers spoke of the support systems they developed, most frequently noted being the assistance of mentors. They asked for suggestions. They sought help. Some of the problems were resolved in the new school year. The teachers recognized aspects of their teaching they wanted to change as they started with a new class. All recognized the need for continued education. They knew there was more to learn already. None of the seven teachers expressed a defeatist attitude about the problems they faced. They had entered the real world of teaching and they were aware of their own continual growth and learning process. At the time of the interview, all were enthusiastic about starting their second year of teaching.

MENTORS

These seven new teachers had a combination of mentor relationships: formal and informal mentors, new and continuing mentors. Six of the seven teachers indicated that they maintained some contact with their mentors from the Satellite Program. These contacts were clearly more frequent if they were teaching in the same building. Those teaching in new buildings, however, called and "checked in" with their mentors periodically. They especially noted asking the mentor questions during the job search and about getting organized and ready for the start of their first school year. Teachers hired in their Satellite schools had developed new mentors as well as maintained a relationship with their original mentors. Most frequently noted were new mentor relationships at the grade level they were teaching. In the case of the teacher who was concerned about her teaching of math, she sought out a teacher with strengths in math. Three of these first year teachers had formal mentors assigned in their schools, yet all developed informal mentor relationships on their own. They all stated the value of mentors in their teacher education clinical experiences and actively sought out people to help them.

As they described their original Satellite mentors, they stated that the mentor had made things possible, looked out for them as individuals, saw what they needed, and got them involved. Only one student indicated that her mentor had not given her sufficient feedback and guidance during student teaching. She had therefore sought out two other informal mentors in her Satellite school. She actively sought help as needed in her new school. Working with another teacher was viewed as a valuable asset by all seven teachers. While one teacher discussed the pressure of comparisons within a team teaching situation, she also indicated the help and support she received from her team. Each of these teachers wanted to continue the benefit of working collaboratively. Each expressed an interest in becoming mentors themselves. Those employed in Satellite schools have already begun informal work with current Satellite students.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

All seven of the Satellite Program graduates viewed themselves as successful first year teachers. All eagerly returned for a second year of teaching. They discussed a relatively smooth transition from student to new teacher. First year teaching was demanding, but they were not surprised by the reality of actual teaching and life in a school. They felt comfortable asking for help and knew whom to consult. All novice teachers reported mentors as a significant factor in their success. They all used problem solving skills in addressing problem areas. They were collaborative in solving problems and in working day to day in their schools.

The seven teachers valued their school clinical experiences as essential to their first year teaching success. They felt that these school experiences were the vital link helping them make sense of their coursework and prepare for teaching in real schools. One teacher had logged over 400 clinical experience hours prior to student teaching. Another had been in her student teaching classroom virtually full time from January through June. They felt they were successful because they had made a commitment to be in their Satellite schools as much as possible. They had seen clinical experiences not as a requirement to complete but as an opportunity to link coursework to the real world of teaching, to learn and develop skills, and to demonstrate their dedication to teaching. Their mentors had welcomed them to the classroom and to the school. They felt they were learning while also helping the mentor and the students. They also emphasized the value of visiting in other classrooms and schools. Intense experiences in one classroom was essential in their minds, but so was the diversity of various experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Several issues arise from this study that offer implications for teacher education. Teachers who have experienced extensive, meaningful clinical experiences in a collaborative teacher education program have a strong base for beginning their first year of teaching. A key element in these experiences was the mentor teacher.

Mentor teachers are a valuable resource to teacher education students. Mentor teachers who are included as valuable partners in teacher education provide a wealth of experiences to prepare future teachers. They helped blend theory and practice. Teacher education students saw the relationship of coursework to real schools. Teachers in the schools helped them make these connections. The teachers wanted these students to be successful in the schools and provided them experiences to reach this goal.

Students recognized the valuable learning in their clinical experiences and went beyond the minimum requirements. They felt they were a meaningful part of a school, that they were making a contribution while also learning themselves. The time commitment was challenging with their other responsibilities. They all felt extensive time in schools was essential.

Satellite students also developed problem solving skills in their schools. Mentors had helped them assess their skills and work on problem areas for improvement. Mentors had helped them become familiar with the school culture and organization. They used problem solving to accomplish their goals in the schools. They had an internship in an entire school, not just a student teaching classroom. After hiring two of the Satellite Program graduates as new teachers in their Satellite schools, a school district superintendent commented that hiring an Elmhurst College Satellite Program graduate was like hiring a second year teacher, not a first year teacher. Their wealth of professional knowledge and experience was a strong foundation for a beginning professional.

Limitations of the study are found in the sample. The sample was selected from Satellite Program graduates who had immediately obtained teaching positions in the area. Finding a teaching position as a beginning teacher in this suburban location is often difficult, as qualified applicants outnumber positions. These teachers may not represent all program graduates. Within the group of seven teachers, each had unique experiences and reflections. While they share commonalities, caution must be exercised in generalizing to all graduates. The experiences and reflections of seven program graduates may not accurately reflect the entire program. Finally, Elmhurst College is a small comprehensive college with undergraduate teacher education programs and may differ in significant ways from other institutions and programs. The Satellite Program was designed collaboratively by Elmhurst College faculty and Satellite school personnel. It was designed specifically to improve the clinical experience component of teacher education at Elmhurst College.

Additional questions for further investigation arise from this study. Further research is needed to understand the experiences of all program participants. Do these findings represent the larger group of teacher education students who become teachers? The mentor teachers are of interest as well. Why do teachers become mentors for teacher education students? What do successful mentors do to support and assist teacher education students? How does this mentorship role fit within their many roles as a teacher? Exploring these questions would provide further understanding of this program.

The Satellite Program is a successful program of collaborative clinical experiences in one teacher education program. The findings offer insights and ideas for others seeking understanding and improvement in teacher education.

* The author wishes to thank the seven program graduates for their participation in this study and for their reflection on this challenging time in their professional careers. They are all exemplary new teachers. The author also wishes to thank Deborah Meyer for her comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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Table 1

**SATELLITE PROGRAM GRADUATES INTERVIEWED
AFTER THEIR FIRST YEAR OF TEACHING**

TEACHER	BEGAN SATELLITE PROGRAM	GRADUATED	BEGAN FIRST YEAR TEACHING	HIRED IN SATELLITE SCHOOL	CUM. GPA (4.0)
<u>ELEMENTARY EDUCATION</u>					
W	Spring 1991	February 1992	Fall 1992*	yes	3.2
S	Spring 1991	May 1992	Fall 1992	yes	3.4
M	Spring 1991	May 1992	Fall 1992	no	2.8
G	Fall 1991	May 1993	Fall 1993	yes	3.5
L	Fall 1991	May 1993	Fall 1993	yes	2.7
<u>EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION</u>					
P	Fall 1991	May 1993	Fall 1993	no	3.8
<u>SECONDARY EDUCATION</u>					
K	Fall 1991	May 1993	Fall 1993	no	3.9

* W worked as a substitute teacher between graduation in February and her first teaching position in August.

Appendix A

THE FIRST YEAR TEACHING EXPERIENCES
OF EARLY CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY
AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
GRADUATES WHO PARTICIPATED IN
THE SATELLITE PROGRAM

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Describe your first year of teaching.

What were your strengths as a first year teacher?

What were your problems as a first year teacher?

Discuss the influence of your Satellite Program experiences in your preparation for first year teaching.

Were there benefits of having a mentor teacher in the Satellite Program?

Discuss the usefulness of other program components. (i.e. courses, other clinical experiences, faculty interactions)

Why did you apply to and participate in the Satellite Program?

Do you have suggestions for improving the Satellite Program or the teacher education program for future students?

Other